

# RADIO TV REPORTS, INC.

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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM Sunday Morning

STATION WDVM-TV  
CBS Network

DATE July 7, 1985 9:00 A.M.

CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Terrorism

CHARLES KURALT: Television coverage of terrorist episodes is Ron Powers' subject this morning.

RON POWERS: It is time for American broadcasters to commit an act of statesmanship, an act so large and so unusual and so utterly improbable that its virtue would confront the evil of modern terrorism and help disarm it. It is time for a summit meeting: people from the networks, the cable systems, the broadcast groups and the large urban stations. The purpose? A voluntary consensus on limits, on some reasonable self-control over the extremes of broadcast options during a terrorist episode. And underline voluntary. These limits should not conform to the government's notion of news. They should conform to common sense and good will.

But a summit meeting among the super-competitive broadcast leaders? Unlikely, you say. So was a summit between Reagan and Gorbachev until last week. Unlikely, but not impossible.

It would have to be inspired by an individual, one network president or group chairman or station manager, someone with the courage, or maybe the strangeness, to affirm publicly for the first time that marginal wealth, marginal rating points, temporary prestige, none of these is as important as history, and that television does not stand apart from history, and that television's role in history is in danger lately of being defined by active forces of evil, and that now is the time to reclaim that role and direct it toward good.

Now, I recognize that words like evil and good and virtue are out of fashion this century. They strike the ear like

the clank of Medieval armor. They embarrass. But the word terror is very much in fashion. And what other values will broadcasters summon when it strikes again? Free market competition? In the past three weeks that standard contributed to a political victory for a radical faction inside Lebanon and the cheapening of human outrage here at home.

What contributions will the coverage make when terrorism becomes a routine domestic story instead of an occasional far-off episode, as some experts are starting to predict?

One reputable American columnist is already calling for this country to retaliate in kind to terrorist murders, an eye for an eye, a death for a death. Imagine the sort of coverage that action might provoke.

So, it's time for a broadcast summit, time to find ways of neutralizing television as a terrorist weapon. What ways? Well, a couple of ideas.

No more on-air dialogue between anchormen and partisan spokesmen from the other side. It's like a free campaign commercial for the bad guys.

No more coverage of spectacle for spectacle's sake: hostage press conferences, readings of terrorist demands.

Leave the victims' families alone. No cash payoffs. No more treating them like winners in a macabre game show. This is a corruption of grief and it turns the families into terrorist pawns.

And finally, it should be made clear that none of these restraints will amount to self-censorship. There's a difference between restraint and submitting to the government's policy line.

I believe that American broadcasters don't really want to look as bad and as self-interested as they looked at times during the TWA hijack crisis. They get locked into that sort of performance by the blind logic of competition. The only key is some kind of consensus for self-control. And the only way that key will be turned is by some individual, some broadcast leader, a statesman.